



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Pentecost 10
Proper 14 (A)
August 9, 2020

RCL: Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28; Psalm 105:1-6, 16-22, 45b; Romans 10:5-15; Matthew 14:22-33

Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28

This story of a sibling sold into slavery feels particularly important at this moment. I'm writing this study in the summer of 2020 in the United States, as we face calls for racial justice and a reckoning with the ongoing legacy of slavery. Some of us may identify with Joseph, bruised and down in a pit while his own brothers stand by. Some of us may be able to see ourselves in Joseph's brothers who want to get him out of the way and end up selling him for a profit, as we recognize our roles in the systems that oppress, exploit, and incarcerate our siblings. Maybe some of us can see ourselves as Joseph's brother Reuben—Reuben tries to avert the harm his brothers are doing to Joseph, and yet Reuben's actions still end up leading to Joseph's enslavement.

And then there are the side characters. Unlike the brothers, the merchants in the caravan don't have anything personal against Joseph; when they profit from Joseph's suffering, they may think they're only doing their jobs. There's also that man "wandering in the fields" who gives Joseph directions. In a story so full of complex interconnectedness, this lone wanderer is an oddity, and worth noticing as we consider the sense of wandering and disconnectedness some of us may feel in a time of change. This episode in the life of Joseph's family gives us food for thought and imagination as we consider the complexity of our own past and present.

- Do you identify with any of the characters in the story? As you imagine the story, what sensory details or dialogue might you add?
- What insights can be gained from placing this story alongside stories of racial oppression in the U.S.? What are the dangers of that kind of comparison?

Psalm 105, 1-6, 16-22, 45b

The psalm reads Joseph's story as one of God's "marvelous works" in a way that our story from Genesis does not. In Genesis 37, we see a story of humans acting on their own very human motives. In Psalm 105, Joseph's suffering at his brothers' hands is part of something bigger—something wondrous—that God is doing. At the end of Genesis, Joseph sees what happens as *both* his brother's wrongdoing *and* God's blessing. He tells his brothers, "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in

order to preserve a numerous people” (Gen. 50:20). Joseph recognizes God’s work in his troubles without absolving his brothers of the harm they intended. And indeed, the psalmist exhorts us to pay attention to the story of Joseph’s family as not only one of God’s “wonders” but also one of God’s “judgments.” For the psalmist, God is present both to judge human wrongdoing and to work wonders on behalf of those same flawed humans.

- Are you more comfortable reading the story of Joseph being sold as a story of human wrongdoing or a story of divine blessing? Why?
- Are there stories in your own life or the life of the church where you see God’s “marvelous works” alongside human action?

Romans 10:5-15

Paul quotes an assurance from Deuteronomy that God’s commands are not distant or difficult. No one has to go on a quest “up to heaven” or “beyond the sea” in order to find out what it is that God wants from us. Instead, “The word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart” (Deut. 30:11-14).

In this season of our life together, when COVID-19 has disrupted many people’s access to church, we can lean on this promise of nearness. Our life in community is vital to our faith, and I’ve dearly missed celebrating the Eucharist together, singing together, studying the Bible together in groups, and all of the ways that we would normally care for each other and be present for each other that have been taken away or drastically reshaped by the pandemic.

Still, Paul goes on to talk about the importance of proclamation and the role of the community in spreading the good news. Amid all the urgency to do the often difficult and complex work of proclamation and community, we have the simple promise that *the word is near, on our lips and in our hearts*. The word is near us whether or not we can receive the Eucharist, whether or not we can all be inside a church building. While much is uncertain, we know that the Spirit dwells within us, and we know that God’s word of love is on our lips and in our hearts.

- Have you experienced times when you’ve felt like you had to go a long way to find God’s word for you? What about times when you found the word you needed nearby?
- What word is on your lips and in your heart now?

Matthew 14:22-33

Our baptism service reminds us of the Holy Spirit moving over water at Creation, the passage of the Israelites through the parted waters of the Red Sea, and the water of Jesus’ baptism. The story of Peter’s brief walk on water is a bit of a divergent take on the image of baptism—Peter literally falls into the water and Jesus pulls him back up before he drowns. It’s not the safe and sanctified space of a tranquil riverbank or a church font, but rather the middle of a stormy sea. And yet, this is where Peter calls out for salvation and grabs onto Jesus’ hand. God is present over the waters of creation, at the parting of the Red Sea, at Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan River, and also here in the choppy waters where Peter fears for his life.

Earlier in Matthew, Jesus calms a storm (Matt. 8:23-27), but here, most of the encounter takes place while the storm is still raging. In Matthew's ordering, we know that Jesus *can* calm a storm, but instead, Jesus walks through the storm to meet the disciples there. Jesus allows Peter to take the risk of walking on the water with him in this storm and is there to lift him out of the water when he falls. Instead of quelling the chaos and resolving the fear and confusion, this time Jesus chooses to be present with the disciples in the midst of that chaos, fear, and confusion.

- Does this story remind you of other stories in the Bible or the life of the church? How is this story similar to or different from baptisms you've witnessed or baptismal art you've seen?
- Does Peter's walk on water remind you of anything that has happened in your life? Have you encountered Jesus or experienced moments of salvation amid chaos?

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